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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000597

FOR EUR/CARC - MBRYZA, R, BBG

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TAGS: AJ KDEM KPAO PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: HASANOV SAYS MAYBE TO BBC, VOA FM
BROADCASTS RETURNING; BUT NO TO RADIO LIBERTY

REF: BAKU 342

Classified By: Charge Donald Lu, Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. 1. (C) Summary: Eight months after Radio Liberty, Voice of America and BBC broadcasts were removed from the FM airwaves, Presidential Administration Political Chief Ali Hasanov has openly indicated that the GOAJ would consider allowing BBC and VOA to broadcast their "alternative" views if an intergovernmental agreement (IGA) is reached, but essentially closed the door on the return of RFE/RL's Radio Liberty broadcasts. Previewing the GOAJ's "concept" for an IGA, Hasanov told Embassy officers that international broadcasters might be able to return to FM if they were to air the same broadcasts they air around the world -- with no more than 25 percent made-for-Azerbaijan local content -- but "Cold War-style" anti-government broadcasts like those produced by Radio Liberty will not. End summary.

Aliyev Assurances to D

¶2. (C) Charge and Acting DCM met with Presidential Administration Political Chief Ali Hasanov July 28 to both register continuing concerns about the detentions of youth leaders Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade (reftel) and to probe him on the next steps for pursuing an intergovernmental agreement aimed at returning Radio Liberty and VOA to the public airwaves, from which they were removed last December. Charge asked Hasanov if he had consulted with President Aliyev in the wake of this month's visit by Deputy Secretary Steinberg, noting that Aliyev had given assurances to D that the radios could be returned to FM frequencies. Hasanov added that similar assurances to Prince Andrew regarding BBC's situation were also given by President Aliyev.

¶3. (C) Hasanov prefaced his comments by noting that he had not yet met with either Presidential Administration Chief Ramiz Mehdiyev nor President Aliyev to define the GOAJ response to the IGA proposed by our BBG delegation February 10 (reftel), but he had general instructions from the President and a "concept" in mind on the way forward. He said that while Azerbaijan's broadcast law forbids foreign broadcasts on the public AM and FM frequencies, an exception is possible via the IGA mechanism, similar to the exception that permits Turkish TRT to broadcast its television programming.

No Interest in Cold War-Style Broadcasts

¶4. (C) However, Hasanov said the government's "concept" is to allow "alternatives" in the form of international broadcasts. He cited BBC and VOA international broadcasts, saying that Azerbaijan could allow them to air in Azerbaijan the same programming they broadcast internationally, but with

only a limited amount of local made-for-Azerbaijan content. Hasanov at first threw out 25 percent as a model, but then said the percentage was only illustrative, not prescriptive. He immediately followed up by saying the GOAJ has no interest in seeing the return of "Cold War-style" broadcasts such as Radio Liberty featuring anti-government reporting. ADCM objected to Hasanov's characterization of Radio Liberty, noting that RFE/RL's broadcasts are, indeed, focused on local matters, but are independent, professional newscasts.

¶15. (C) Hasanov was not ready to debate the merits of Radio Liberty. He repeated his view that broadcasters such as BBC and VOA could make their way back to local FM airwaves if no more than a quarter of the content was produced specifically for Azerbaijani audiences. Without specifying a date, Hasanov suggested that talks would only be possible beginning in September.

BBG/Washington Will Need to Make Call on Next Steps

¶16. (C) Comment: Over the course of nearly a year, the GOAJ's moves against the FM broadcasts have always been couched as simply enforcing national law. Repeated attempts to illicit truthful commentary about the GOAJ's opposition to RFE/RL content have prompted little but legalistic talking points. Hasanov's comments clearly are closer to the truth, and the 75/25 "concept" looks to have been tailor-made for the BBC. Officials have consistently made allusions to their lack of opposition to the BBC and VOA, which they see as "harmless." Meanwhile, Radio Liberty's morning-to-evening local newscasts, talk shows and call-in programs were seen as opposition forums, and, indeed, they provided microphones for political voices that were seldom heard in the state-controlled TV and radio world.

¶17. (C) Comment continued: During Embassy's collaboration with BBG representatives over the past year, we have agreed that VOA and Radio Liberty would stand together, refusing to trade one for the other. We are clearly at the point where sticking by that formula will dictate the end of the negotiation process. In the meantime, BBC should be able to move rapidly toward an IGA, a step that we suspect was in the cards all along. The BBG will need to determine whether it wants to revisit its all-or-nothing stance; would continued negotiations on an agreement for VOA, perhaps with a strengthened local news block, be worthwhile? Embassy Baku is prepared to support whatever position the BBG and Washington decide. We do believe that our current maximalist position will not yield progress in the short- or long-term. If we hold to that position, the Embassy recommends that Washington consider ending this charade of negotiations and implement a measured and reasonable retaliatory step to prevent this issue from hanging over our bilateral relations for years to come.

LU